

THE ISSUES AT STAKE IN THE HUSSAIN AFFAIR

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In the recent activities of the Bajrang Dal and related organizations, we in India are witnessing the birth of what may well grow into a Hindu version of the Taliban. The curtain raiser was the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Now once again an act has been committed which has raised a national outcry: the burning of paintings of M.F. Husain in a gallery in Ahmedabad. This kind of activity, if left unpunished, can escalate to still more objectionable dimensions.

A few years ago it was the demolition of a mosque, this year it is the burning of paintings and the vandalizing of a painting and the vandalizing of a gallery, next year it could be the burning of books, and subsequent to that even our thoughts could be sought to be controlled. Once the germ of fear is embedded in people, it spreads like a malignancy and people begin to apply self-censorship. And this is precisely the intention of those who vandalize in the name of defending Hindu religious sentiments: to threaten non-Hindus, and particularly Muslims, and to threaten liberal thought and action.

Not surprisingly, some people are already saying that Husain, being a Muslim, should not have sketched a Hindu goddess in the nude—that a Hindu artist has the liberty of doing this but not a Muslim. So now we have to work out separate subjects for paintings by Hindu and Muslim artists. This is unacceptable, for artists do not pause to consider their religious affiliations before deciding on what to paint.

And if it applies today to artists then tomorrow it will apply to social scientists and natural scientists. A Hindu sociologist will not be permitted to pronounce on Muslim personal law. A Muslim historian will not be permitted to comment adversely on the activities of a Hindu sect in the past. We have already seen the near-lynching of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the Jamia Millia by a group of Muslim students because he stated that the ban on *The Satanic Verses* should be withdrawn. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity will come to intervene in the views of scientists discussing evolution, genetic engineering, and such like. We shall be replaying the “monkey trials” of the U.S. In this process, creativity of various kinds will be curtailed and dictated to by those in a position to threaten others with arson and vandalism or worse. And what of those of us who distance ourselves from all formal religions or are agnostics or even atheists?

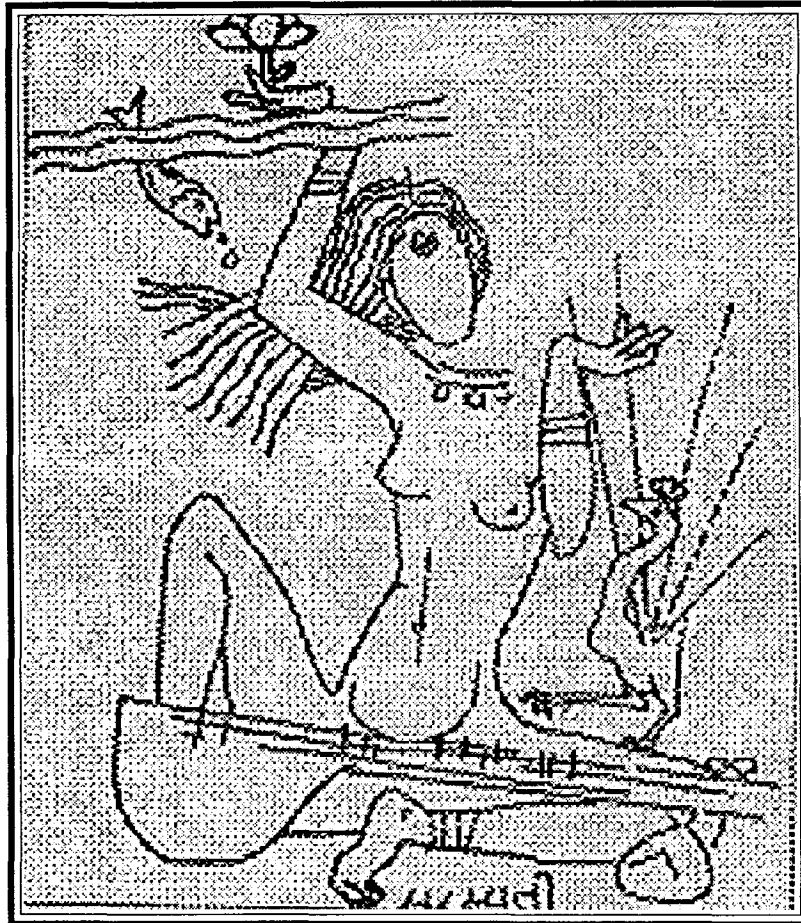
The attack on Husain’s paintings raises a number of issues which are pertinent to the future of our society. If a group of people wish to object to the work of an artist or author, there are a variety of civilized ways in which this can be done. And a civilized reaction is surely all the more expected if the matter concerns religious sentiments. Such work can be commented upon in the media and a debate may follow to ascertain the views of a cross-section of people, rather than go by the dictates of the self-appointed protectors of Hindu and Muslim sentiment. To file a criminal case against an artist for

painting a particular painting is quite unwarranted. The FIR against Husain should immediately be withdrawn.

Among a series of sketchings of goddesses which Husain has been drawing over many decades, there is one of a nude seated woman with a vena on her lap, which he calls Saraswati. This was sketched some time ago and when first exhibited elicited no negative response. Suddenly, now, it is said to be hurting religious sentiments. The objection is to the nudity. Yet this is a feature which is frequently found in most Hindu temples, in sculptures of Yakshis or even more starkly, of Lajja Gauris. Specific to the representations of Saraswati, there are graphic descriptions of physical beauty in texts, and in some temples (as many have pointed out), she is shown adorned with ornaments but no clothes. Such sculptures occur in temples which are sacred spaces, but at the same time are also public spaces. If the arsonists and the vandals and their promoters were even in the least bit familiar with the history of our culture, they would have known this. And when confronted with this information, they would not make absurd statements such as the one that in those times people in India went around naked.

The question is not one of the social history of dress, but of being familiar with the aesthetics and religious sentiments of a tradition in which the depiction of goddesses in this manner not only caused no offence but evoked an appreciative aesthetic. The objection today to depicting a goddess in the nude is an indicator of how distanced such people are from the mainsprings of their past. The depiction of the human body was central to sculpture and painting among the Greeks and the Indians although the aesthetic differed. Hence the frequency of unclothed bodies subject to a variety of aesthetic canons. This was not the case in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In part, this can be traced to the imprint of the notion of original sin as it emerges from the story of Adam and Eve. It would seem that some modern Indians have internalized this notion.

For some, Husain is a great artist who radically changed the sights of modern Indian painting. Others are less enthusiastic. Nevertheless, his contribution to the emergence of modern Indian painting has been recognised by his peers in the profession. And that is the most important recognition. But in this too the question is not one of whether a great artist or a lesser artist should be permitted to paint a particular subject a particular way. Nor is it a matter of aesthetics. It is not creativity which is being judged. What is implied is the political motive, as many have pointed out. It does not appear to be accidental that when the paintings were burnt, the gallery chosen was one of the galleries known for free experimentation in the arts and located in the city of Ahmedabad, known to be a city prone to Hindu-Muslim riots.



This picture of Saraswati, drawn in 1926 by M.F. Hussain, roused the anger of Hindu fundamentalists and led to the partial destruction of his paintings at an exhibition in Ahmedabad 1996. For details, please see our Notes and Comments.

Such re-reading of a painting was pre-figured by Salman Rushdie in his *The Moor's Last Sigh*. In that novel, a painting by Aurora Zogoiby, originally exhibited in 1960 to no public outcry, creates a furore when it is re-exhibited many years later. The painting depicted an actual incident in the 1960 test cricket series between India and Australia. In Rushdie's words: "the series was level at 1-1 and the third game had not been going India's way. In the second innings, Baig's half-century-his second of the match-enabled the home side to force a draw. When he reached 50, a pretty young woman ran out from the usually rather staid and upper-crust North Stand and kissed the batsman on the cheek. Eight runs later, perhaps a little overcome, Baig was dismissed (c Mackay b Lindwall), but by that time the match was safe".

On later exhibition, fundamentalist forces mustered against the gallery "claiming it was flagrantly displaying a pornographic representation of a sexual assault by a Muslim 'sportsman' on an innocent Hindu maiden."